

# Stonechat

Green

*Saxicola torquata*

Uncommon winter visitor and passage migrant and scarce resident or summer visitor.

The Stonechat is a scarce summer visitor to Berkshire and a passage migrant or winter visitor in larger numbers. It is typically found breeding on areas of heathland, but also occurs on commons and wasteland, particularly where Gorse *Ulex europaeus* is present, and in young coniferous plantations. On passage and in winter it also occurs at gravel pits, sewage farms and on farmland. Nationally the breeding population, which is sensitive to hard winter weather, fell through the latter half of the 20th century then grew 2-3 fold from 1994 to 2007, with a series of warm winters, falling sharply following snowy winters in 2009-10.

During the breeding season tetrad survey, Stonechats were recorded in 47 Berkshire tetrads, with breeding confirmed in 16, an increase of 60% compared to the 1987/9 survey. The distribution shows a strong correlation with the heathland in the south of the county. Although it can hold territory in small areas of suitable habitat, Stonechats are conspicuous and it is unlikely that many breeding pairs were overlooked: in 2008, 26 territories were located on the East Berks heaths and 8 territories on Greenham Common. Subsequent cold winters may have reduced that number, though the numbers of tetrads in which breeding was confirmed or recorded as probable each year changed little from 2008 (10) to 2011 (6).

The abundance maps show that whereas the breeding population in 2008/11 was almost exclusively in the south of the county, the winter population was threefold higher, more dispersed and predominantly on the downs in the north of Berkshire. In the winter of 2010/2011, following cold and snowy conditions in the winter of 2009/10, the numbers of tetrads in which wintering Stonechat were reported fell by 90%.

Monthly summary counts (figure 1) published in annual reports, inevitably biased towards sites favoured by bird-watchers, show a decline in numbers as the winter progresses, then an influx of birds in the early spring. Numbers are lowest at the end of the summer with post-breeding dispersal. A second influx occurs in autumn as wintering birds arrive. The extent to which the spring and autumn peaks represent passage birds is not clear, nor is it known whether part of the wintering population stays to breed.

Breeding numbers had increased through the 20th century, though erratically: between 1946 and 1966, breeding was confirmed in only four years, with never



more than three pairs involved. By the time of the 1987/9 tetrad survey, breeding was confirmed in 10 tetrads, though the highest number of pairs recorded breeding in any one year had been 14 in 1976, 12 of which were on the heaths in the east of the county. A survey of the east Berkshire heaths during the 1993 breeding season located 15-16 pairs of Stonechats, of which 13-14 pairs bred raising 35-38 young. A similar survey in 2007 located up to 26 pairs in the same area. Away from the heathlands, there were two pairs in small areas of scrub on the Gillette Way Industrial Estate in Reading in 1986, one of which was seen carrying food during May.

In some years, winter influxes are quite marked. In 1976/7, there were at least 20 birds in west Berkshire, including eight at Brimpton Gravel Pits, 20 in mid-Berkshire and seven at Wraysbury Gravel Pits in the east. In September and early October 1989, there were at least 15 at seven sites, including six together at Smallmead Gravel Pit. There was then a second influx in November 1989 of a further six to eight birds and many of these autumn arrivals appeared to remain to winter, with some 13 birds being present in January and February. By 2006-8, the peak numbers of birds wintering shown in annual reports had risen to 90-100. Birds disperse from their winter quarters after

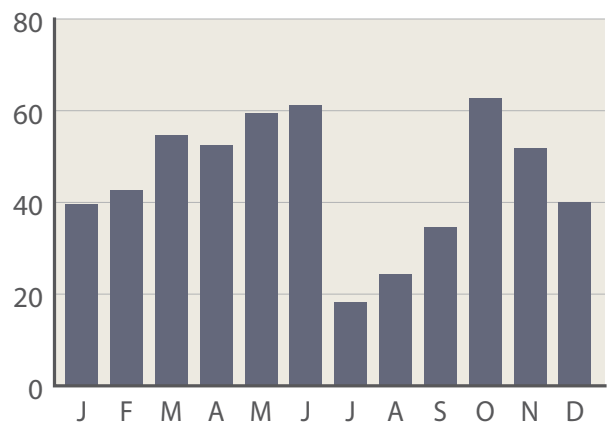
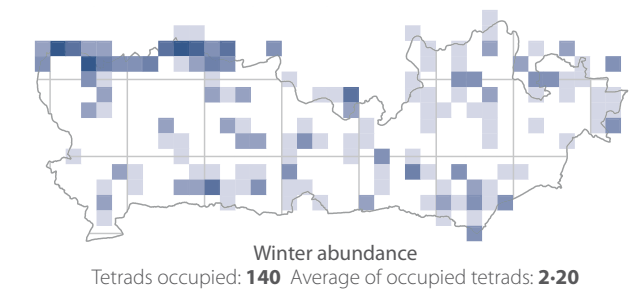
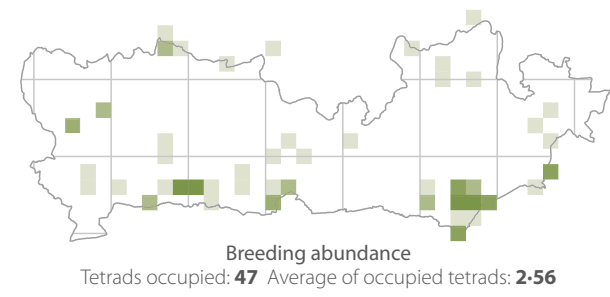
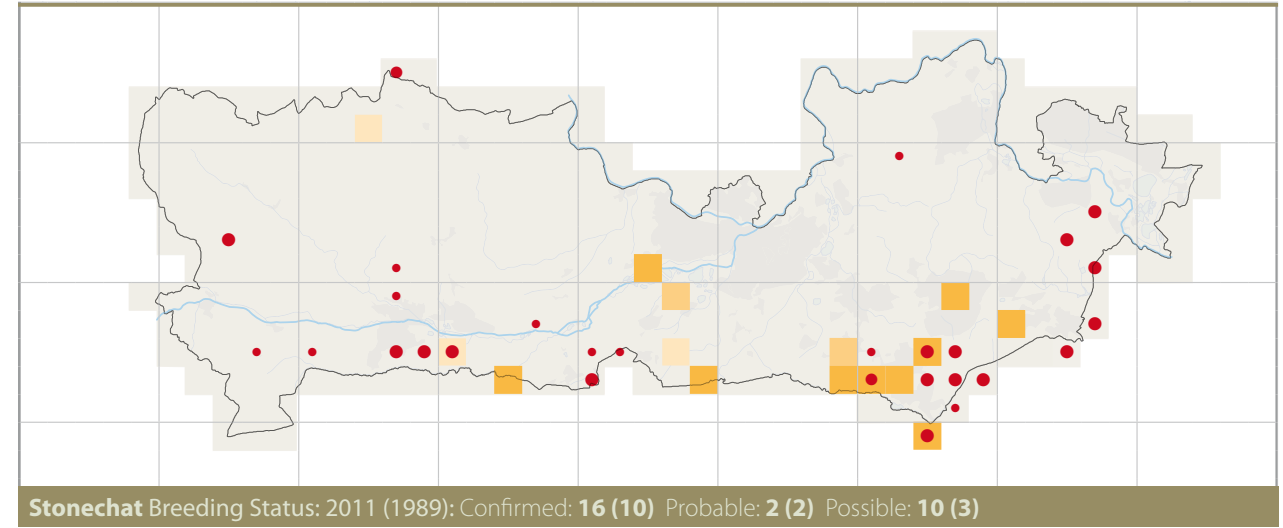


Figure 1: Stonechat – monthly maxima average 2001–2008 from annual reports



February and an increasing number are then reported from traditional breeding areas.

Ringling evidence is so far limited to the recovery at Finchamstead in March 1992 of a bird ringed in Strathclyde in August 1991.

The *Historical Atlas* indicates that the Stonechat was uncommon in Berkshire in the 19th century, although Noble (1906) states that it was resident in many parts of the county. In contrast to the current pattern, it was then less common in winter than in summer. There

were breeding or summering records in the 1930s and 1940s from Crookham Common, Bradfield, Burghfield, Twyford, Wellington College, Pinkneys Green, Eton and Slough Trading Estate. This represents a considerably wider summer distribution than is the case today.

There has been one record of a Siberian Stonechat *S. maura* in Berkshire, a female which was trapped and ringed at Brimpton where it was present from 31st October to 2nd November 1986.



Photo: Gordon Langsbury